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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000234

SIPDIS

STATE FOR PM, WHA/CEN, AND WHA/PPC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2014

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: TASK FORCE XATRUCH UPDATE: MADURO RESOLUTE IN
CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

REF: A. REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1724

[1](#)B. TEGUCIGALPA 2846

Classified By: Ambassador Larry L. Palmer;
Reasons 1.4 (A), (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In face of overwhelming domestic opposition and high costs to his own political popularity, President Maduro reaffirmed Honduras' commitment to send the next contingent of troops to Iraq and indicated those troops are likely to be deployed there beyond the initial one-year period. In fact, the second contingent departs Honduras early next week. Maduro's decisive public comments were made immediately in the face of local media coverage of Nicaragua's reported decision not to send its second contingent to Iraq because of financial difficulties. Recent polls show that between 67 to 80 per cent of the Honduran public is opposed to the presence of Honduran troops in Iraq. Minister of Defense Federico Breve has repeatedly highlighted the desire for the USG to provide concrete assistance to the Honduran Armed Forces in response to strong Honduran support for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In particular, Breve is seeking parity for FMF with other Central American countries. President of Congress Pepe Lobo told the Ambassador he believes he can win Congressional approval for an extension of the Honduran deployment for another year.
END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) On January 22, when much of the local media gave prominent coverage to reports that Nicaragua would not be sending its second contingent to Iraq because of financial difficulties, President Ricardo Maduro declared that "there would be no change of policy." "Honduras," he reaffirmed, "is planning to rotate its first battalion for a second one." He indicated that the rotation would take place in mid-February. Maduro also reiterated that Honduras would continue to support international efforts aimed at the pacification, reconstruction, and democratization of Iraq.

[1](#)3. (C) A clear sign of the political price to President Maduro is reflected in comments made by his Nationalist Party Deputy, Pompeyo Bonilla, who chairs the Congress's Defense Committee. Separately the same day, Bonilla, who is generally pro-U.S. and supportive of our interests, told reporters that it would not be convenient to extend the presence of Honduran troops in Iraq. Bonilla stressed that the Congress had approved a one-year deployment to Iraq which had always indicated a rotation of a second battalion to replace the first. However, Bonilla made clear the Executive Branch would have to seek congressional approval to prolong Honduras' military participation in Iraq. With a clear eye on recent public opinion polls, Bonilla then added that he "did not believe it would be most convenient (for Honduras) and did not believe that extending (the Honduran presence) was a policy shared by the United Nations and other involved countries." (COMMENT: President of Congress Pepe Lobo told the Ambassador he believes he can win Congressional approval for an extension of the Honduran deployment for another year.
END COMMENT.)

[1](#)4. (U) A recent poll published on January 13 in El Heraldo newspaper showed that 77.8 percent of the residents of Tegucigalpa opposed the deployment of Honduran troops to Iraq, while only 22.2 percent of Tegucigalpa residents supported the deployment. The poll had a margin of error of five percent.

[1](#)5. (C) Ambassador and EmbOffs met January 27 with the new commander and deputy commander of Task Force Xatruch. Ambassador thanked the Task Force for its bravery and dedication and wished them a safe deployment in Iraq. The second contingent departs Honduras for Iraq early next week. The Commander remains very concerned about the security at the base housing the Honduran deployment, in particular the problem of having the troops' meals picked up and delivered on a regularly scheduled basis three times a day.

[1](#)6. (SBU) At a January 27 luncheon at the Ambassador's residence and in other recent discussions with EmbOffs, Defense Minister Federico Breve and Chief of the Joint Staff Isaias Barahona underscored Honduran resolve in support of reconstruction efforts in Iraq. They especially noted the

positive impact the deployment was having on the troops in Iraq. The troops strongly support their mission and the public comments of those soldiers who have returned early due to injuries have been unequivocally positive about the role and conditions in Iraq. Breve and Barahona expressed satisfaction that there had been no serious injuries or fatalities involving Honduran troops, despite the two mortar attacks on their compound. Barahona believes the troops are well trained, noting a recent joint Honduran/Iraqi capture of a suspected Iraqi terrorist outside the base. Breve, however, also highlighted the budgetary impact the deployment is having on the Armed Forces budget given the increased costs of salaries and benefits.

17. (C) Breve also echoed security concerns due to the fact that the Hondurans must make three food runs a day to pick up their food. While the time of each pickup could be varied somewhat, this was still an unnecessary risk in Breve's eyes. This concern has also been reported in military channels.

18. (C) Breve has also repeatedly highlighted the desire for the USG to provide concrete assistance to the Honduran Armed Forces in response to strong Honduran support for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In particular, Breve is seeking parity for FMF with other Central American countries. Honduras wants financial assistance for such priorities as airplane fuel for intercepting narcotrafficking planes, helicopters to support counternarcotics efforts, vehicles and spare parts for their aging fleet, and other key needs.

19. (C) Comment. It is ironic that a task force providing support to a key U.S. foreign policy objective is named after the leader of the Honduran effort to defeat the American filibuster William Walker in Central America in 1856-7. Honduras has not wavered in having Task Force Xatruch fulfill its commitment to Operation Iraqi Freedom, despite political and budgetary costs. However, Honduran officials are cognizant of the disparity in FMF assistance in the region, and are seeking to end this imbalance as a stalwart ally of the U.S. in Iraq. End Comment.

10. (U) Minimize considered.
PALMER